



Food, Abstinence, and Resistance in Mahasweta Devi's "Mahadu: Ekti Roopkatha"

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Received: 09 Dec 2025; Received in revised form: 06 Jan 2026; Accepted: 10 Jan 2026; Available online: 14 Jan 2026

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Abstract— *Food Studies help the present academia to explore how food functions a great deal in literature and how food opens a new gateway to interpret a literary text. In a literary text, food's function can be multidimensional. In Mahasweta Devi's writing, food plays an important role as it is addressed very frequently. In most of her writing, Devi places her characters at the margins, who are most of the time deprived of food. In her writing, the marginal characters are in an extreme crisis of food. This crisis is not natural. The elite/superior class creates this food crisis to sustain the marginal class's dependence on the elite. The class position of Mahasweta Devi's characters can be located through the foods they are given access to or denied. The present paper seeks to analyze Mahasweta Devi's "Mahadu: Ekti Roopkatha" (2004) from the perspective of Food Criticism.*



Keywords— Mahasweta Devi, food, class, abstinence, resistance.

It will be good to write about food in literature, with what Terry Eagleton says about food. He says, "If there is one sure thing about food, it is that it is never just food ... Like the post-structuralist text, food is endlessly interpretable, as gift, threat, poison, recompense, barter, seduction, solidarity, suffocation." (Eagleton) Another critic, Roland Barthes writes about the semiotics of food. To him, food is "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior." (Barthes 29) Contemporary Food Studies have approached food from various perspectives—from anthropological to psychological. The anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss discusses food's importance in any culture. According to him, food in human life is no longer a biological thing; it is, rather, cultural as humans cook, and transform food from one condition to another—from the raw to the cooked. And, thus, food reflects the deeper mental structure of human beings (Levi-Strauss 586-95). Food is not something that is eaten for living on the earth. Food is something more as it connects the eater's identity with the food the eater eats. A rich scholarship includes food and identity in its academic sphere. As the sociologist Claude

Fischler notes, "Food not only nourishes but also signifies." (Fischler 276)

Food is an integral part of social structure as well. One's identity is determined by the food he/she eats and the food he/she does not eat. Regarding food and identity, French gastronomic critic Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin says, "Tell me what you eat, and I'll tell you what you are." (Brillat-Savarin 1) Again, regarding food and psychology, we can be reminded of what Kima Cargill discusses in her essay, "Historical Background of Food Scholarship in Psychology and Major Rhetorical Approaches in Use" (2013). As Cargill discusses, Elizabeth Capaldi's edited volume, *Why We Eat What We Eat: The Psychology of Eating* (1996), gives an outline of how human beings "learn about eating, from conditioning experiences as well as from family and culture, rather than the purely physiological mechanisms involved in hunger, digestion, and eating" (Cargill 40).

The complex relationship between food and humans can be addressed from two different perspectives. The first one is the biological to cultural relationship, and the second one is the individual to the collective relationship. The second type of relationship can be understood as

psychological to social. From the very beginning of life, the human mind reacts to what it eats. The mind begins to memorize the taste of the food it likes. The providers of these foods are part of the society to which the individual eater belongs. The society, through its choice of food, inculcates its norms into the individual's mind. Food, thus, constructs the individuals for its society and the individual can easily adapt to the societal norms as his/her mind is fueled by the food the society provides.

In Mahasweta Devi's writing, food is repeatedly referred to. It easily draws the attention of her readers. In her writing, food's function is multidimensional. Food symbolizes power and class position. In most cases, Mahasweta Devi's characters do not get enough to eat. Many of her characters die early as they suffer from hunger from the very beginning of their birth. With food, the issues like social, economic and political factors are strongly connected. Food marks one's social, economic, and political position. In most cases, socially, economically, and politically benefited people politicize with food. In many cases, the subaltern group suffers from hunger not only because of the food crisis, but also because the elite group uses its socio-economic power to capture the whole authority over food. The food-occupying class denies the poor access to food. Hence, Mahasweta Devi's characters can be categorized by what they eat and what they cannot eat. The powerful class/group weaponizes food to control the powerless. Full control over food confirms the powerful's sustenance of its position.

As Pierre Bourdieu shows, 'taste' is very much a social construction. The core idea Bourdieu develops is that taste is a social marker. In Mahasweta Devi's writing, taste of reori (a kind of grain) is connected to the identity of the Korku tribe. The Korku tribes are accustomed to the taste of reori. They are so strongly habituated to the taste of reori that they do not eat other cereals like wheat, bajra, makai or jowar.

In Mahasweta Devi's "Mahadu: Ekti Roopkatha" (2004), the protagonist Mahadu represents the Korku tribe. Once they lived in the forest. They live happily with other creatures like snakes. They learn from their ancestors that snakes are their cohabitant. Their way of living was disrupted by the elite, who consider natural elements as a commodity. When the elite started cutting the Sagwan trees, the Korku tribe lost their basic food 'reori ghash' (a kind of grass seed). Thus, the elite not only sold the Sagwan trees, but they also forced the Korkus to lose their food.

As Devi informs in her short story, "Mahadu: Ekti Roopkatha" (2004), the Korkus do not live more than

twenty years. The government took initiatives to provide food to the Korkus, but they denied such food help. The Korkus abstain from the rice, wheat, and jowar supplied by the government. For a long time, they have been denying this sort of government food supplies. Hence, the Korkus suffer from malnutrition and die very early. As the Korkus are not habituated to the common cereals like wheat, jowar, makai, and bajra, provided by the govt., they cannot digest these foods. They suffer from high indigestion and fall ill whenever they are fed such foods. There may be a number of reasons behind the Korkus' getting unwell. Disgust for those foods, in general, is one such reason. This disgust is psychological, social, and cultural. The Korkus have adopted a psychology that is very much influenced by their culture. The taste of reori is determined by the tongue. The tongue sends a message to the brain, and the brain preserves the memory of the taste. Thus, the taste of reori is transformed from the biological to the psychological. On the other hand, the Korkus are biologically and culturally far away from the taste of cereals like wheat, bajra, makai, and jowar. Now, when they are introduced to these cereals, there arises a sense of disgust in the minds of the Korkus. This is a "psychological signature of disgust" (Rozine 233) that the Korkus develop in their mind. The disgust is so deep that they get unwell whenever they are fed with such cereals.

The elite's exploitation of food, here reori, has a deep impact on the Korkus. The Korkus cannot adopt other food items. The impact is long-term. One generation of the Korkus is deprived of reori. The Korku's gene has remembered the food they liked to eat. Snatching away that food, the elite actually wipe out the whole community. A hundred years after the elite's destruction of the Korku's basic food, there comes a new generation, the young people of which die very early. The whole Korku tribe will die out someday. Thus, the powerful class annihilates the existence of the Korku. Food, thus, is weaponized by one class to abolish the other, the weaker class.

Abstinence is another issue that plays an important role in "Mahadu: Ekti Roopkatha" (2004). The government's assistance of food to the Korkus becomes futile. The Korkus do not like the common cereals like jowar, makai, wheat, and bajra. They deny these food items. In the text, their denial is mentioned as Satyagraha. As the Korkus do not have access to reori, they lack proper nutrition and physical power; they deny eating the foods provided by the government. The political agenda—Satyagraha—that was popularized by Mahatma Gandhi became a political standpoint in the lives of the Korkus. Their denial of government-supplied foods humiliates the government that is controlled by the elite/powerful class. The Korkus' abstinence from food functions as a resistance against the

elite. Mahasweta Devi's texts always expose the marginalized people's resistance against the center in multiple ways. Whether the marginalized people's resistance is fruitful or makes any change may be put under question, but resistance is there.

The popular reading pattern is always challenged in Mahasweta Devi's text. The Korku's denial of government-supplied food irritates the so-called conscious elite. The elite in *Mahadu: Ekti Roopkatha* (2004), represented by Dr. Apte and the IAS Officer Breez Kapoor, feel disturbed when the Korkus do not accept the government food assistance. The politics of helping a particular class /community is questioned. The elite's moral feeling or kindness is also challenged through the food denial of the Korkus. In the short story, the Korkus' denial of food is symbolic. The Korkus die, but they do not bend down before the ethical, social and political assistance of the elite-led government. Thus, the Korkus' abstinence from food becomes political.

The forest of Sagwan was once the chief source of food for the Korku tribes. Under the large Sagwan trees, the grass *reori* bloomed well. This sort of grass needs shade. The direct heat of the sun burns the *reori* plants. When the elite rulers began to cut down the Sagwan trees, the plants began to die. By cutting down Sagwan trees, the elite endangered the ecological balance as well. Consequently, the whole scope for *reori* plantation is destroyed forever. The lives of the Korkus depended much on the Sagwan forest. With the destruction of the forest, the elite actually deprive the Korku of the right to live. The elite, to gather and hoard more and more, throws the natural resources into danger. Deforestation also implies that there is a threat to the forest-dwelling people. The powerful want to capture the lands and the forest. To them, lands and trees are their property. The Korkus—the inhabitants of the forest—were the burden to the elite. Hence, the elite created hunger and forced the Korkus to live on hunger.

Mahasweta Devi's narrative is an activist narrative that makes its readers conscious of the politics of hunger. As narrated in the story, "Mahadu: Ekti Roopkatha" (2004), the Korkus could gather their food *reori* from the forest. They did not remain hungry as nature was not in danger. After deforestation, they lost their food *reori*—the only cereal they ate. They did not like cultivating any cereals like wheat. They ate only those foods that were available in nature. The destruction of *reori* is not just the destruction of a food item; it also took away the rights of the Korku tribes to food and other natural resources. The invasion of the elite or the elite-led government is a big threat to the food culture of the Korkus and to the cultural identity of the Korku.

Forcing the Korkus to forget their food choice, what do the elite want to do? The elite want to include the Korkus as a part of a civil society, which is chiefly headed by the elite. The elite also want to impart their food culture into the lives of the Korkus. The government supplies those foods that are not of the Korku's choice. Forcing the Korkus to accept foods like wheat, bajra, makai, and jowar, the elite/the State wants to impose its terms and conditions on the Korkus. So, acceptance of wheat, etc., means acceptance of law and rules of the State. But the Korkus would not accept that, and hence, they deny accepting rationed foods. And, thus, they are forced to abstain from food.

As already discussed, the government once tried to feed the Korkus, but they failed. The government forgets them later. The young district collector says, "It is very hard to change the food habit of the primitive tribe...wheat, jowar, bajra, makai—what not have we issued to them? They did not accept those foods. They get unwell if they eat those foods" (Devi 293). The district collector's comment proves that the government has failed to change the food habits of the Korkus. The Korku's forced abstinence from food (wheat, jowar, bajra and makai) is a resistance against the government. They resist the politics of the State. They do not want to be a part of a society that they think is not their own. Their food abstinence is a challenge that creates a sense of failure in the minds of the State. The foods supplied by the government are rich sources of nutrition, but the Korkus do not accept these foods. Their identity is strongly connected with *reori*. It seems that if they accept wheat, etc., they would displace their own identity. Not melting their own identity, they erect and fix a politics—a mode of resistance which cannot be terminated by the State.

The popular cereals are not of their choice. Year after year, they were habituated to a specific kind of food. They liked to eat this grain. Their body or stomach could easily digest as the Korkus' gene kept the food in its memory. The body of a Korku cannot adjust to any other foods than *reori*. A Korku and *reori* are deeply connected. One identifies the other. The *reori*—or the identifier of a Korku—is spoilt and vanished from the lands where the Korkus lived, implying that before killing a particular community or tribe in a so-called modern society, the elite/the upper-caste-led government first displaces the food the indigenous people used to or liked to eat. Introducing cereals like wheat to the Korkus is not just an alternative arrangement of food, it is rather, an enforcement—a forced abstinence from the food *reori*.

The Korku tribe's abstinence from food has a rooted history. This history revolves around the nature and its exploiter—the developmentalist colonial rulers. The

cutting of Sagwan trees for developing the railway line is the reason why the Korku tribe began to reject food. Their abstinence from food is both literal and metaphorical. The Korkus understood that the powerful would benefit from the railway line. And for the benefit of the powerful, they, the Korkus, are to sacrifice their food. It is this historical moment when the Korkus spotted the nature exploiter and decided to protest the intruder. The food reori mediated between the human, here the Korku tribe, and nature. It is food that strengthens the bond between humans and nature. And it is the bond that encouraged humans to prevent any exploitation of nature.

The reori is a grain that grows automatically in the forest areas. No one harvests them. It means that the Korkus eat what they get from nature. They do not violate the rules of Nature. They learned this nature-human relationship from their ancestors. Now, if they accept these foods supplied by the government, they break the rule they have learned from their ancestors. So, the Korkus' denial of the government food supply can be treated as their commitment to the rules dictated by both nature and their ancestors. Through food choice, the Korkus establish their own identical choice and remain dutiful to their own system that can never be melted with the so-called common system/politics.

The elite/ state are unable to understand the cause of the Korkus' rejection of food. Generation after generation, the Korkus have been rejecting foods provided by the State. They did not even send the pregnant women and children of their community to government nutrition centers. This was a conscious refusal of nutrition. The Korkus do not rely on the elite's initiatives regarding food. Moreover, they are so strict about their food choice that they do not allow others to supply food. This food strictness reflects their commitment to their own culture, the age-old food culture. Due to a lack of proper nutrition, the Korkus' mortality rate grows higher every day. In one way, they are forced to abstain from food; on the other, they choose abstinence as a mark of their protest—a silent protest. Their abstinence from certain foods seems to be effective as the elite/ civil society feels disturbed at the Korkus' food rejection. Being denied, the elite feel humiliated and suffer from a sense of failure. Driven by this feeling of failure, the elite aggressively try to feed the Korkus.

As narrated in the story, the two aspiring nutritionists, Subhadra and Chintamoni, take Mahadu to their research centre for investigation. They give him all kinds of modern nutritional and medical support. They do so to achieve fame as nutritionists. To them, Mahadu is just a subject of their research. They are the parts of the state apparatus that establish a particular discourse about the Korku tribe. Subhadra and Chintamoni want to displace one

discourse—that the Korku tribe has turned away from life—and establish the other discourse—that the body of the Korku tribe still can respond to the nutrition-based foods. As researchers, they want to establish their names. This mindset is again a part of the colonial mindset. Mahasweta Devi, addressing this multilayered colonial angst, raises a question on the responsibility of the state. Towards the end of the story, "Mahadu: Ekti Roopkatha" (2004), a miracle happens. The body of Mahadu gets larger in the laboratory. The body becomes so large that the glass house, where he was kept, breaks into pieces, and Mahadu begins to eat everything—large buildings, trains, train lines, etc. This part of the story is symbolic. The whole Korku tribe is amalgamated into one body—the body of Mahadu. Mahadu, the gigantic figure, becomes so ferocious that he devours anything capitalist, anything connected with so-called development. The story ends with the typical Mahaswetan style, giving a jerk to the middle-class mindset and mentioning a big revolt of the powerless against the powerful hegemonic group.

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